Another Pakistani dream fading out

Audiences are doing the disappearing act; film after Pakistani film is flopping. The story so far, by SHUMAILA HEMANI

SAQUIB and his friends have a male-bonding routine: every other day, they meet for lunch at a local *dhaba* and then proceed to a cinema to watch low-budget Punjabi movies such as *Budha Shair*. "The film doesn't really have a story but I've watched it three times because it is a good time-pass," he explains.

Like Saquib and his buddies, masons, painters, garage mechanics and many others whose daily wages do not exceed 150 rupees throng cinemas after a hard day's labour. By passing lewd remarks while buxom Punjabi heroines gyrate onscreen or doing the *bhangra* to pounding tracks they feel that their money has been well spent. "Films sell dreams," says Imran Qureshi, a student at the Lahore University of Management Sciences. "The problem with Pakistani films is that the dreams they sell are not what the majority is into."

According to Huzurul Nawab, general manager of Karachi's Nishat cinema, it's unemployed youth or labourers who have the freedom to behave with complete abandon who frequent cinema houses. The reasons vary. Saquib prefers going with his friends rather than his family because he can "let loose and have fun wholeheartedly". Umair, also a regular, enjoys seeing light-weight movies which require little effort to understand.

Whatever their motives, the sort of films shown in cinemas today cater to the fantasies of a restricted viewership. "Contemporary Pakistani cinema suffers from hackneyed, stereotypical themes that offer nothing new or provocative in terms of subject," believes film critic Zulqarnain Sahid. The audience that has consequently been excluded from these trite offerings are families, who once constituted the bulk of the cine-going public.

Out of the 59 films released in 2000, only three succeeded at the box office. But this decline is not a recent phenomenon, nor can it simply be attributed to the limited creativity of film-makers. "Cinema audiences thinned after the arrival of the VCR in 1977," says Aziz Imam, the manager of Lahore's Capri Cinema. "Now, we face a threat from satellite and cable television and the rampant piracy of VCDs and DVDs."

Some even trace the fall in the fortunes of cinema owners further back to 1965, when Ayub Khan's government banned Indian movies. "I watched 36 Pakistani and Indian movies during just two and a half months in 1963," says Abdul Rahim, a businessman. "But after the ban, my choice became rather limited."

In his book, *Pakistan Cinema: 1947-1997*, the late film-maker Mushtaq Gazdar explains that the prohibition imposed on screening Indian cinema was one of the fallouts of Partition. The subcontinent's film industry split in two, which resulted in the dwindling fortunes and foundering careers of local film moguls. Limited in scope and resources, the Pakistani film industry was too small to cope with the demand of local theatres, given that out of the 144 films released in the year before Partition, only nine were produced in Lahore.

"Pakistani film-makers had literally left their careers behind," bemoans writer Rehan Ansari in his view of Gazdar's book. "Indian films were coming into their own while Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor, Madhubala, Nargis et al were all stars on the rise".

But until 1977 cinema halls were kept afloat with Pakistani films, some of which proved to be quite popular. "Movies such as *Andaata*, released in the 1960s, celebrated its golden jubilee," says Imam. "Today, Pakistani movies are taken off after a few weeks." In his opinion, the early '70s marked the heyday of the cinema industry. Indeed, several new theatres opened up between 1968 and 1975 owing to a surge in the urban population brought about by mass rural migration. Pakistani cinema set a record in 1974 by releasing 114 films—one which remains unchallenged to this day—but numbers and fortunes fell so far that a dismal 61 were released in the 1980s. The ebb can solely be attributed to the promulgation of the Motion Pictures Ordinance in 1979 which "tried to control the medium of cinema in the name of safeguarding religious ethics, national security and public morals," writes Gazdar.

Ironically enough, come Zia's Islamic regime and violence replaced glamour. "How else does one explain Pakistani cinema's sudden ugliness in the late '70s and '80s?" asks Ansari. "Screens teemed with murder, rape and pillage... It was the beginning of a cruel martial law and cultural atrophy, where with the general bloodying his hands in the Afghan crisis and guns and drugs flooding Pakistan, we became brutal as never before."

The early '70s marked the heyday of the industry. Pakistani cinema set a record in 1974 by releasing 114 films; by the '80s, that figure dropped to just 61. Come General Zia's Islamic regime and violence soon replaced glamour

This along with VCRs drove away the upper and middle class from cinema houses. "By the 1980s, around 62 cinema halls has closed down. Many such as Koh-e-Noor, Naz, Rex and Rio became shopping malls," says Shahid. "Zia destroyed the taste of the masses by introducing cheap action movies from China and Hong Kong."

When democracy returned in the '90s, the censor board became less intractable about vulgarity and cinemas gained back the miscreants who now sustain them. But the '90s also saw the advent of satellite television in urban Pakistan. Cheap and ubiquitous, it became the preferred form of entertainment for lower middle class families who, till then, had patronised cinema houses. "People have stopped coming in order to save money," complains Aziz Imam. "The poor would much rather watch a film on cable or rent one for 10 rupees."

Meanwhile, cinema owners are also extremely perturbed by rampant piracy. Competition from pirated VCDs and DVDs is particularly tough for western movies, especially since Pakistani cinemas are renowned for featuring flops. Official statistics of 1989 claim that approximately 75 films were imported that year from Hong Kong, USA, Italy, Japan and Britain though most were released around six months after their release abroad.

It is Pakistani directors who need to pull up their socks, and they may well be doing just that. The introduction of pop songs and Bollywood-style outfits as well as foreign locales is drawing in crowds. "*Yeh Dil Aap Ka Hua* is the first Pakistani movie I watched," says Areeba, a 14-year-old Bollywood buff. "And I think it is even better than most Indian movies."

(Courtesy **Herald**, *the Karachi-based newsmagazine)*